THE EVIDENCE OF CHRISTIANITY NOT WEAKENED BY THE FRAILTY OF ITS MINISTERS.

A

SERMON

Preached in the CATHEDRAL CHURCH at BRISTOL,

On SUNDAY, JUNE 29, 1777.

BY JOHN CAMPLIN, M. A.
PRECENTOR OF BRISTOL.

OCCASIONED BY THE EXECUTION OF WILLLIAM DODD, LL. D.

AND

Published at the Request of the AUDIENCE.

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M,DCC,LXXVII.
[Price Six Pence.]

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2 CORINTH. iv. 7.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us.

THE Apostle, in this and the preceding chapter, in order to correct the errors and false tenets of the Jewish Christians, insists on the superior glory and excellency of the Gospel, compared to the dispensation of Moses; calling this latter "the ministration of death;" "the ministration of condemnation," and "the Old Testament, which is abolished and done away:" and by way of contrast to this depreciating description of the Jewish œconomy, which had answered its end, and therefore was of no farther use or efficacy,

cacy, ſtiles the revelation of Chriſt "the ſpiritual life, giving new teſtament, and glorious miniſtration of the ſpirit, and the miniſtration of righteouſneſs exceeding in glory." He then declares his own fidelity and diligence in preaching this Goſpel; and tells us how he and his fellow-labourers were qualified for ſo difficult a work; that the ſame Omnipotent God, who at the creation of the world "had commanded the light to ſhine out of darkneſs, had ſhined in their hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jeſus Chriſt." But leſt in conſequence of this "abundant revelation" "they ſhould be exalted above meaſure in their own conceits," or others ſhould "think of them more highly than they ought to think," to check the arrogance and wrong conceptions both of one and the other, he immediately ſubjoins in the words of the text, "but we have this treaſure in earthen veſſels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us."

The

The *treaſure* here ſpoken of is that glorious Goſpel of Chriſt which the Apoſtle had juſt before deſcribed; a term moſt properly adapted to impreſs our minds with a lively ſenſe of the tranſcendent value of this ineſtimable favor.

Firſt, the Goſpel is a *treaſure* of divine wiſdom; ſo Saint Paul ſays in his Epiſtle to the Coloſſians, "in Chriſt are hid all the treaſures of wiſdom and knowledge." Compare the ſacred Scriptures with the beſt writings of the moſt renowned philoſophers, and ſee the amazing difference in point of reaſon, conſiſtency, and dignity, between one and the other; "the world by the wiſdom of philoſophy knew not God;" men were ignorant of his divine nature, and incommunicable attributes; they knew little or nothing of his moral government and providential diſpenſations; they were as little acquainted with their own creation; how mankind were firſt brought into being; and from what bitter ſource ſprung

that variety of moral and natural evil which are now ſo generally prevalent in this world: the immortality of the human ſoul was a matter of very doubtful conjecture; the reſurrection of the body not expected or thought of; and their notions of future rewards and puniſhments erroneous and abſurd.

It muſt contribute much to the preſent comfort, as well as future happineſs of every thinking man, to be truly informed as to all theſe intereſting points; this information is clearly attainable from the revelation of Jeſus Chriſt; and tho' it be true, that many, very many, will not avail themſelves of it, this is owing to their natural blindneſs, or acquired prejudices, and not to any defect in the revelation.

Secondly, the Goſpel is a *treaſure* of divine Grace and Love: it ſupplies us with the means of pardon and reconciliation; it aſſures us of that ſtrange method of ſalva-

tion, the ſacrifice of the ſon of God for the ſins of a guilty world; it promiſes us "that by the merits and death of Chriſt, and through faith in his blood, we may obtain forgiveneſs of our ſins, and many other benefits accruing from his paſſion;" it convinces us of the malignity and dreadful conſequences of ſin; it implants a new principle of life and holineſs in our hearts; it teaches us how to govern our wills and regulate our diſorderly affections; it alleviates all the troubles and miſeries of this life, by ſetting before us the unchangeable happineſs of a better; it gives us the comfortable aſſiſtance of the Holy Spirit, as the means of ſanctification, and the only ſource of true filial obedience; whereby we are aſſured of the efficacy of our faith, that we have not followed enthuſiaſtic viſions, or "cunningly deviſed fables," but that the religion we profeſs is the *great power of God to* preſent peace, and final *Salvation*. The teſtimony of this divine Agent *bearing witneſs with the human ſpirit*, is alſo a ſeal, or

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ratification of all the promiſes of God not yet fulfilled in or to us, and "an earneſt of our future inheritance."

If then the certain aſſurance of man's immortality, and the full perſuaſion that a God of all goodneſs hath amply provided for his happineſs through the whole of this never ending exiſtence, be a valuable acquiſition, if a real, ſubſtantial, and laſting comfort in the profoundeſt depths of woe, if the extraction of the ſting of death itſelf by an expectation of the reſurrection of the ſame body, are the precious gifts of the Goſpel; then is it a *treaſure* indeed; in compariſon of which the richeſt worldly treaſures are mere trifles and ſhadows.

The value of the moſt precious jewel is not diminiſhed by the inattention of an unſkilful or careleſs beholder; nor is "this pearl of great price," this *treaſure* of the Goſpel, the leſs valuable becauſe the world in general pays no regard to it; becauſe ſo many

many of the ſons and daughters of men "ſee no beauty in Chriſt that they ſhould deſire him," have no real experience, or perſonal enjoyment of any one bleſſing of his Goſpel. Nor are theſe favors and mercies uſually conveyed to men contrary to their own deſires and inclinations, by inſtantaneous raptures, and irreſiſtible energy, but by the diligent uſe and application of thoſe means which are appointed by divine wiſdom for the purpoſe of enlightening their underſtandings, influencing their wills, reforming their depraved vitious nature, reſcuing them from *the captivity of the devil*, and inveſting them with "the fulneſs of the bleſſing of the Goſpel of Chriſt."

The principal agents whom God hath from the beginning ſet over this buſineſs, are poor weak frail men, objects of the ſame divine mercy, and ſubject to the like paſſions and infirmities with the reſt of their fellow-creatures, to whom they are com-

commiſſioned to declare the *glad tidings* of Goſpel Salvation. It is an honourable, it is an important commiſſion; honourable with regard to the Sovereign Majeſty of their Lord and Maſter; "they are the ambaſſadors of Chriſt, and ſtewards of the myſteries of God;" important, becauſe the choiceſt intereſts of mankind are ſo nearly concerned in the ſucceſs of their miniſtry. And unleſs they are in ſome meaſure qualified for this ſacred office by their abilities, and by their integrity, by their own unfeigned perſuaſion, and experimental knowledge of the truths they teach, and by the *obedience of faith* iſſuing therefrom, they will execute it with little credit and ſatisfaction to themſelves, or benefit and advantage to others. But notwithſtanding the higheſt qualifications in point of judgment and diligence, zeal and conduct, it ſhould always be remembered by the miniſters of the Goſpel, as well as their hearers, that they are but *earthen veſſels*, infirm, periſhing mortal men. That with the beſt endowments and moſt

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ſtudious application, tho' they may reaſonably hope to be preſerved from capital errors, they are ſtill liable to fall into leſſer miſtakes, having no juſt pretence in every point to abſolute certainty of opinion, or infallibility of judgment. Again, tho' by the grace of God, co-operating with their own earneſt endeavours, they may be kept from the groſſer ſins, yet are they not invulnerable by the temptations of the world, the fleſh, and the devil. They have the ſame depraved nature, the ſame enemies on every ſide to ſtruggle with, as other men; and tho' it may be their heart's deſire and conſtant prayer that they may "grow in grace," that they may be kept "without ſpot, unblameable, and unrebukable in the ſight of God," yet would it be hypocritical in them to pretend to, and unreaſonable in others to expect, the perfect purity of an Angel, in the miſerable tenement of a human body. But in no reſpect does it more evidently appear that the Miniſters of the Goſpel are *earthen*

 veſſels,

veſſels, than in the certainty and frequency of their mortality. They are ſubject, like all other men, to the ſtroke of ſudden, premature, or violent death. Nor can the moſt valuable accompliſhments, the moſt approved miniſterial performances, or the moſt flattering proſpect of future uſefulneſs, retard or ſuſpend the fatal blow. One may be mercifully taken away from an unforeſeen evil to come, and gratified with the immediate reward of his faithful labors. Another may be ſuffered to fall ſhamefully, not only as a puniſhment for his own unfaithfulneſs, but an awful example to other preſumptuous and ſelf-dependent mortals; that they, "admoniſhed by his fate, may be the more afraid to offend;" and that he, thro' his ſufferings in this world, may be reſtored to the embraces of Divine Mercy, "and his ſpirit ſaved in the day of the Lord Jeſus."

However that be, it ill becomes us to find fault with the moſt myſterious or unwelcome diſpenſations of God's good providence,

vidence, or give the leaſt way to that dangerous temptation of "charging God fooliſhly." Rather let us aſſuredly perſuade ourſelves, in the midſt of the moſt ungrateful occurrences, that when we ſhall have knowledge ſufficient to ſee thro' all the ways of God to men, and be enabled to form a right judgment of the whole ſcene of his tranſactions, "his righteouſneſs will appear as the light, and his juſt" yea and his merciful "dealing as the noon-day."

In the mean time ſome reaſons may be given in juſtification of this particular mode of divine procedure, communicating the *treaſure* of the Goſpel in *earthen veſſels*.

And firſt it muſt be right for the Miniſters themſelves to be ſenſible and mindful of their own mortality. No conſideration ſo likely to promote their ſerioufneſs, and quicken their diligence; they will be active in the duties of their calling "becauſe they know they have but a ſhort time;"

they will "work the work of him that ſent them while it is day," when they duly conſider "the night cometh in which no one can work;" they will ſee ſtronger motives to be ſerious and vigilant in the care of others ſouls, becauſe it is ſo very uncertain how ſoon their own "may be required of them;" they are more likely to be faithful in the execution of their truſt, becauſe they know not when it ſhall be ſaid unto them, "give an account of thy ſtewardſhip, for thou mayſt be no longer ſteward." Again, this ſenſe of their frailty and mortality will alſo keep them lowly in their own eyes: the nature and dignity of their office, the honor and majeſty of the maſter whom they ſerve, are ſubjects of ſelf-exaltation. They are likewiſe in danger of being lifted up by their ſpiritual attainments; extraordinary favors, diſtinguiſhed virtues, and extenſive uſefulneſs, are food for the pride of the human heart: it was neceſſary even for an inſpired Apoſtle to have "a thorn in the fleſh, the meſſenger of Satan to buffet him, leſt

leſt he ſhould be exalted above meaſure, thro' the abundance of the revelations." A laborious and ſucceſsful Miniſtry is alſo apt to excite the admiration, love, and eſteem of thoſe who are within the ſphere of its activity, and partakers of its benefits.

There is not a more dangerous enemy to any man's peace and welfare than popular applauſe; it has been too powerful for many a wiſe head, and once upright heart. Nothing ſo likely to obſcure the underſtanding, and pervert the judgment; for he who at all events will preſerve the public eſteem and admiration, is governed by the opinions, or rather paſſions, of other men, and not by his own reaſon; and whoever is led by this pitiful motive to act contrary to the perſuaſions of his mind, and the dictates of his own conſcience, inſtead of procuring real honor, brings indignity upon his perſon, and a diſgrace upon his profeſſion. "Behold (ſays the prophet) his ſoul which is lifted up is not upright in him." Now all theſe evils are

beſt

beſt prevented by a conſtant remembrance of his weak, uncertain, dependent, changeable ſtate. The moſt accompliſhed, moſt laborious, and moſt ſucceſsful miniſter of the Goſpel, when he ſeriouſly reflects that none of his good qualities are owing to his own natural wiſdom or ſtrength, that whatever diſtinctions he enjoys it is God that maketh him to differ from others, will not be "wiſe in his own eyes, nor prudent in his own ſight."

When the moſt eminent apoſtle was recounting ſome of his beſt performances, "I labored more abundantly than they all," in order to check any aſpiring thoughts, and preſerve an humble ſenſe of his own dependence, he immediately adds, "Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." And the more any man lives and acts upon the gifts of Divine Grace, the larger ſupplies will he, from time to time, receive, the greater will be his abilities, and the more beneficial his miniſtrations. "As every man hath received the

gift

gift, even ſo miniſter the ſame one to another as good ſtewards of the manifold grace of God; if any man ſpeak, let him ſpeak," not as his own invention ſhall prompt him, but as "the oracles of God" direct him; "if any man miniſter, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth, that God in all things may be glorified, through Jeſus Chriſt." Again, the dangers even the beſt of men are expoſed to of falling into ſin are a perpetual ſource of humiliation. Some of the choiceſt of God's ſervants have been overtaken with grievous offences; this evidently points out the ſlippery ground on which they tread, and in its natural tendency will cauſe them not to be "high-minded, but to fear." Knowing that their ſtedfaſtneſs depends on divine aſſiſtance, and not on any mere human power; and that, if that aſſiſtance be taken from them, they muſt "loſe their ſtrength, and become weak like other men;" under theſe circumſtances they cannot be arrogantly confident of their ſtanding,

ing, when it is ſo very uncertain how ſoon they may fall.

But however free the Miniſters of Chriſt may be kept from ſpiritual pride, or from any groſs ſin, give me leave to mention again the certainty of their death (which ſhould never be forgotten) as matter of the deepeſt humiliation. When Heaven ſmiles upon their labors, and mankind are filled with their praiſes, when the ſcene of their importance is enlarging, and their uſefulneſs apparently increaſing, how ſuddenly may they be ſtopped in the midſt of this career, the moſt pathetic and moſt admired eloquence "be put to ſilence in the grave," "their purpoſes broken off," "and all their thoughts periſh!" And is not this enough to ſuppreſs every emotion of pride and vanity, to be thus aſſured, and to have it confirmed by ſuch repeated experience, that the breath of man, in his moſt flouriſhing circumſtances, is as fickle, and often as ſhort, as the breath of popular applauſe; and

and "how can earth and aſhes (knowing itſelf to be earth and aſhes) be proud!"

Theſe are the reaſons to be aſſigned, in relation to the miniſters of the Goſpel, why this *treaſure* ſhould be conveyed to the world through the medium of *earthen veſſels*. This œconomy of Divine Wiſdom may alſo be made appear to be for the advantage of the hearers.

Men are very apt to admire ſecond cauſes to the diſparagement of the firſt; to confide in the human inſtrument, and neglect the Divine Agent; to ſhew an undue attachment to the perſon and miniſtrations of one teacher, in preference to others who are charged with the ſame commiſſion, and employed in the ſame work. This partiality begets ſtrife and envying, animoſities and diviſions, to the diſquiet of the church, and diſturbance of ſober men. Saint Paul ſoon ſaw and reproved it in the church of Corinth; tells them, that "Chriſt was not divided, neither was Paul crucified

ſied for them; that no one of them ſhould be puffed up for one againſt another; that they ſhould learn not to think of men above that which is written; for who (ſays he) is Paul, and who is Apollos, but Miniſters by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?" Now as human nature is always the ſame, and the like unjuſtifiable preference, and partial attachments, are ſtill prevalent among men, I know no means ſo likely to correct and ſuppreſs them as a juſt ſenſe of the frail ſtate of thoſe men whom they wiſh ſo particularly to unite themſelves to. The truths of the everlaſting Goſpel do not depend on the breath of mortal man. Chriſt hath promiſed to be always preſent with his church in a ſucceſſion of faithful miniſters. Your moſt approved favorites may fall into error, may fall into ſin; and ſhould they mercifully be preſerved from both theſe, they cannot eſcape death. This makes no difference or alteration in God's purpoſe of granting you ſalvation thro' the merits of his Son; for the di-

vine promiſes and your ſecurity depend "not on the wiſdom of men, but the power of God." And notwithſtanding this uncertain and changeable ſtate of the diſpenſers thereof, the Goſpel itſelf, like its divine Author, remains fixed and unalterable, "the ſame yeſterday, to-day, and for ever.' For tho' "all fleſh is as graſs, and all the glory of man as the flower of the field; tho' the graſs withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away, yet the word of the Lord endureth for ever; and this is the word which by the Goſpel is preached unto you."

We ſee then the proper effect of this diſpenſation, rightly underſtood, the committing the *treaſure* of the Goſpel to *earthen veſſels*, both with regard to Miniſters and their hearers, is to ſuppreſs all aſpiring thoughts, all ſelf-ſufficiency, all vain confidence, "to caſt down every imagination that exalteth itſelf againſt God, and to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Chriſt;" to magnify God,

and leſſen man; to convince us that, whatever enviable qualities we ſee men in poſſeſſion of, they are not their own property, but lent them for a ſeaſon, to anſwer ſome wiſe purpoſe, probably for a very ſhort ſeaſon; that however uſeful and even neceſſary any man may appear for the *furtherance of the Goſpel*, that yet this gracious work can and will be carried on without him; that he who "putteth down one, ſetteth up another;" that "the right hand of the Lord hath the pre-eminence," and will always find means to accompliſh his own work.

The melancholy occurrence which directed my thoughts to this ſubject is too freſh in your memories to need any recital; an occurrence which, however grievous it may be to men of the ſame profeſſion, or painful to the feelings of humanity, can be no injury to the intereſts of that religion which, whoever underſtands it knows not to depend on human Virtue, but divine Power. Two out of the ſmall number of

twelve ſelected by our Lord fell foully, and one of them finally; yet no man ever thought the evidence of Chriſtianity to be weakened by the apoſtaſy of Peter, or the perdition of Judas. Theſe men enjoyed the peculiar advantage of being eye and ear witneſſes of what our Saviour did and ſaid. The great numbers now employed in the miniſtration of the Goſpel have no ſuch advantage; they are no where promiſed to be exempt from the frailties and enormities of human nature; and is it then to be wondered at that ſome of the many *earthen veſſels*, in which this *treaſure* is depoſited, ſhould be ſhamefully broken, and rendered no longer "fit for the Maſter's uſe?" or is the *treaſure* in conſequence of ſuch deſtruction of the *veſſel* in any danger of being loſt? There are not the leaſt grounds in Scripture to excite ſuch admiration, or warrant ſuch apprehenſion. The proper and ſcriptural influence of this or the like awful event is, with humane tenderneſs and chriſtian ſympathy to lament the fall of others; and keep a ſtricter guard

on

on our own integrity; not to truſt on our ſtrength and reſolutions for ſecurity, but on thoſe ſuccors which the mercy of God has provided for us; on no account to run the dreadful riſk of oppoſing the will of God, or acting contrary to our own convictions; to be conſtant in uſing the means of Grace; to be earneſt in our addreſſes both publickly and privately to him who is alone able to keep us from falling; to let ſlip no opportunity of approaching the Lord's table, to increaſe our faith, animate our devotion, and ratify all the divine promiſes in our favor; by a worthy participation of that Holy Sacrament. This is the ſpiritual nouriſhment, the ſupport and ſtability of the chriſtian life. Let not any who deſpiſe or neglect the means be ſurpriſed if the happy effects fail which they are promiſed to produce; or think it ſtrange that God ſhould abandon thoſe, who wilfully, preſumptuouſly, and habitually forſake him.

A Miniſter

A Miniſter of Chriſt can neither quicken nor keep alive a true zeal for promoting the ſalvation of other men without a ſtrict attention to his own; and an unceaſing vigilance "leſt that by any means when he hath preached to others, he himſelf ſhould be a caſt away."

Let your faith at no time reſt on ſo tottering a baſis as the wiſdom or virtue of man, but on that immoveable foundation *the power of God.* It is an idle attempt to endeavour to ſhelter yourſelves under the faults of your teachers. No man of common ſenſe will ſuppoſe the example of an evil miniſter can be an excuſe or covering for his ſins.

You all claim the liberty of judging for yourſelves, independently of human authority, in matters of opinion; uſe the ſame liberty in matters of practice; framing your lives on the model of divine truth,

truth, not on the pattern of frail fallible men.

A natural right to diſpute any man's ſentiments preſuppoſes a ſtronger diſcretionary right to deviate from his conduct; and therefore to plead human precedents, of whatever rank, to juſtify a relaxation of morals, is not the ſuggeſtion either of religion or reaſon.

If neither the education, profeſſion, employment, nor ſuppoſed ſuperior good qualities of God's Miniſters can always ſecure their innocence; this ought to make *you* the more fearful of your own. And if God ſpares not his own peculiar ſervants, when they forfeit his favor and protection, "take heed leſt he ſpare not you." Let "none of you be puffed up for one againſt another;" let your warmeſt affections be fixed on the perſon of Chriſt, in preference to his choiceſt ſervants; "that God in all things may be glorified;" "that the excellency

cellency of the power," the power of converting ſouls from ſin and death, may ever appear to " be of God, and not of men," that " no perſon may glory in man," " whether he be Paul, Apollos, or Cephas," or take offence at religion becauſe of the ſcandalous immoralities of ſome of its profeſſors; " but he that glorieth let him glory in the Lord: " that the Goſpel be not hindered;" " that the word of God may have free courſe;" " that the name of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the Grace of our God, and the Lord Jeſus Chriſt."

THE END.

cellency of the power," the power of converting souls from sin and death, may ever appear to "be of God, and not of men," that "no pardon may glory in man," "whether he be Paul, Apollos, or Cephas," or take offence at religion because of the scandalous immoralities of some of its professors; "but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord;" "that the Gospel be not hindered;" "that the word of God may have free course;" "that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the Grace of our God, and the Lord Jesus Christ."